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SUBJECT: POLICE BEAT DISSIDENTS IN CHURCH IN SANTIAGO DE CUBA

Classified By: CDA: J. Williams : For reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) SUMMARY: Cuban police on 4 December entered the church of St. Teresita in Santiago de Cuba and beat with clubs and used pepper spray on about 25 dissidents who along with other parishioners were awaiting the beginning of mass. The dissidents had held a peaceful march to the church to protest the detention in Havana of Gerardo Sanchez Ortega of the Movement of Cuban Youth for Democracy (MCJD), who had been taken into custody with two other members of this organization that is demanding the opening of private universities. Between fifteen to eighteen people were taken into custody. The police continue to detain seven of these people. End Summary.

12. (C) On 29 November Rolando Rodriguez Lobaina, Eliecer Consuegra Rivas and Gerardo Sanchez Ortega were detained in Havana for not having identity documents. Rodriguez and Sanchez are members of the organization, Movement of Cuban Youth for Democracy. This organization held a press conference in Havana on 26 November to present a petition with 5000 signatures to demand academic freedom and the reopening of the Catholic University Santo Tomas de Villanueva. In fact, all three along with MCJD's president, Nestor Rodriguez Lobaina, had attended an informal meeting of members of youth organizations held at POL officer's house on 26 November. It is unclear whether the three were picked up because of their participation in the organization's activities or were caught up in the police sweeps of downtown Havana neighborhoods reported for the past few months aimed at expelling youths out of the city who are not from Havana.

13. (C) According to Enrique Reyes Fernandez, member of Movement of Cuban Youth for Democracy from Havana, police on 4 December released without charges Consuegra and Sanchez and boarded them with a police escort on a train intending to drop Consuegra in her home town of Holguin and Sanchez in Santiago. Rodriguez remains in custody in Havana but has telephoned Reyes and expects to be shipped back to his home in Guantanamo within the next few days. In the meantime in Santiago, Yaquelin Hechavarria, the wife of Sanchez, organized a protest against her husband's detention. Reyes

stated that the police learned the protesters planned to meet the train so they let off Sanchez at another stop. Hechavarria lead a march through the streets and then the group gathered in the church of St. Teresita. The protesters dressed in black and many had stickers on the clothing saying, "I don't cooperate with the dictatorship". Reyes said that the protesters choose to hear the mass because 4 December is the day of St. Barbara, a Catholic martyr who in the Afro-Cuban religion is associated with the warrior god Chango, and for many in Cuba is a symbol of rebellion. All sources of information such as Reyes, Martha Beatriz Roque and Elizardo Sanchez stated that the 25 to 30 protesters were not causing any type of disturbance in the church. They also said that there was crowd of onlookers around the church and several churchgoers not involved in the protest were present awaiting the mass. An estimated 15 police vehicles surrounded the church.

14. (C) Father Jose Conrado Rodriguez has told the press that he was dressing for mass when he heard a commotion. He said that the police kicked open a door and entered the church where they beat the activists with fists and clubs and used pepper spray on some of the people in the church. Father Conrado stated that the police did not respond to his calls to stop the desecration of the church. According to Reyes the police took 18 people into custody. Elizardo Sanchez of the Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation states that fifteen were arrested. Eight have been released.

15. (C) This incident has shocked most dissidents. Even Reyes expressed surprise because he said that his organization, many of whose members are devout Catholics, have approached the Church in Cuba for support several times

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and were always refused. Reyes said that the Church authorities very much would like to regain the right to have private Catholic schools in Cuba but made it clear that they want to avoid confrontation with the GOC. Reyes said that he doesn't know why the police would risk a desecration of a church. Reyes hopes that the Vatican will condemn the incident as has the Catholic Bishops Conference of Cuba. He stated that he feels that the GOC fears his organization because the members are young and that many ordinary Cuban parents do want the right to send their children to private schools. Elizardo Sanchez stated that there has been a marked increase in harassment of youth, including many young people not involved in political activity. He estimates that police forcibly ship out of Havana between 50 to 100 youths a week found with identification giving some city other than Havana as their place of residence. He is not sure whether the Church incident was solely the result of decisions by the Provincial police in Santiago or if it was coordinated with the highest levels of state security. MBR has no doubts saying that nothing happens in any part of the country without the knowledge of the upper echelons of the security apparatus. Elizardo thinks that the incident might be part of a campaign to prevent demonstrations on 10 December, International Human Rights Day.

16. (C) Comment: It is likely that the GOC does fear the fact that youth groups have been increasingly active in organizing protests. The police have been using very forceful measures to keep people from participating in demonstrations and to break up protests. There has been a notable change of pattern on the part of Cuban security forces. For several months there has been a dramatic drop in convictions for political offenses and acts of repudiation against opposition figures by government recruited mobs. However, there was been a huge increase in harassment of younger people using short term detentions and forceful expulsions from Havana. Despite years of indoctrination, Cuban youth is largely completely disillusioned with the

regime and will probably continue to be the focus of government repression.

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